

# Has Rahm Emanuel Become a Liability for the White House?

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Rahm Emanuel has been a controversial appointment from when he was first offered the position of White House Chief of Staff. For many progressive Obama supporters, Emanuel's appointment was the first of many decisions by the White House that were discouraging. It signaled that Obama's commitment to changing things in Washington was not as strong as might have been hoped. Nonetheless, it was generally understood that the appointment of this consummate political insider was necessary for Obama to pass his program. It was also understood by many that concerns about Emanuel's abrasive personality, strong ties to the Clinton era Democratic establishment, work in the finance sector during the years of the Bush administration and general political outlook could be ignored if Emanuel helped Obama succeed in the White House.

Emanuel, however, has not helped Obama succeed in the White House. Other than the initial success of the stimulus bill there have not been many substantial legislative successes from the Obama administration. While it is not reasonable to hold Emanuel entirely responsible for all this, legislative successes are really the only reason why it would be worth it to keep Emanuel around. Emanuel has asserted that the [mistakes of the Obama administration have occurred because his advice was not heeded](#). However, making sure that advice is heeded is part of the job of an advisor or chief of staff. Giving good advice is not all that difficult; turning that advice into action is the hard part.

Ascribing Emanuel's failure to an inability to get his voice heard in the White House is far from the full story. At key moments, Emanuel's advice was loud, clear and wrong. Emanuel's position, in the end of 2009, that Obama needed to pass something on health care so that he could take credit for some success was wrong-headed and may well have been the moment when the presidency was most in danger of unraveling. [Urging the White House to cut a deal with, of all people, Joe Lieberman](#) so that they could get a bill was an extraordinary lapse of judgment, one that was not without serious consequences for the White House.

In addition to failing in perhaps the most important part of his job, Emanuel has also become an ongoing news story, and rarely a good one, for the White House. His most recent use of the phrase "f%\*ing retards" to describe liberal Democratic members of congress [drew attention because of the offense which Sarah Palin and her supporters took](#), but it is equally troubling that the chief of staff for a Democratic president would use a phrase like this to describe the base of the party.

During the first 13 months or so of the Obama presidency, Emanuel has rarely been out of the spotlight, beginning with his [father's unfortunate comments](#), but also for his [personal style and creative and frequent use of profanities](#). Not all of Emanuel's media attention has been negative, and some of it is clearly out of his control. He is an interesting and compelling person who seems

to naturally draw media attention. Nonetheless, staff members, even chiefs of staff, should have a lower media profile than that.

This, of course, was one of the great strengths of Obama's campaign. David Axelrod and David Plouffe managed to run a brilliant, disciplined, focused and successful campaign without ever becoming the story. The two David's were extraordinary professionals, never causing any problems or bad news stories for the campaign or candidate. The same cannot be said for Emanuel.

While Emanuel cannot be blamed for all the short-comings of the Obama administration, he certainly has contributed to many of the problems. Getting rid of Emanuel might, in the short term, help Obama pursue more effective legislative strategy, but it would also help the president send a message to the country and to his supporters that he understands that something is not right with his presidency. His unwillingness to make a move like this has lent his administration impressive stability, but it has also contributed to the notion that Obama somehow does not care. His calm temperament, which can sometimes make him seem aloof, has exacerbated this perception.

Obviously, a balance has to be struck. The president cannot shake up his administration every time something goes wrong, nor should senior members of the administration be treated as political tools to be dismissed when Obama needs to send a message. Too much instability in the administration will signal a presidency that has lost control and lost its way, but that is not close to being an issue yet for Obama. Emanuel has become a liability on the administration because of his media presence and the stories that surround him, but is not delivering the legislative victories which were the primary rationale for his appointment. It happens that some changes in the administration would send an important message as well. The choice regarding Emanuel, while not easy, should be clear.